

DISABILITY HISTORY



Pivotal Year 1978, Part One

BY WARREN SHAW

As we saw last month, the story of “Pivotal Year 1968” [*Able Newspaper* Dec. 2022] was all about foundational gains notched by the founders of the New York City Disability Rights Movement. From free parking at meters to the establishment of the Mayor’s Office for the Handicapped, accessibility provisions for the City’s Building Code and the amendment of the City’s Human Rights Law to bar discrimination against the handicapped for the first time anywhere, 1968 was the culmination of efforts many years in the making.



Political button, showing outline of person in a wheelchair, with a power fist in the wheel and the letters “DIA” on the arm. Designed by Pat Figueroa.

of young people, barely past twenty years of age.

Fifty years on, it is difficult to recapture the intensity of the “Generation Gap” that seized the United States in the late 1960s. Just as it is difficult for anyone born after, say, 1980, to fully grasp that the Boomer generation wasn’t always large and in charge and that once upon a time the Boomers were young, scrappy, insurgent idealists. But the Generation Gap was a real thing at the end of the decade of protest, and the City’s disability movement was as affected by it as anything else.

By the early 1970s, a new corps of disability activists was coming on the scene. They included people at Long Island University led by Judy Heumann, folks at Goldwater Hospital and a group at Brooklyn College led by Fred Francis and Pat Figueroa.

Mostly born in the 1940s, many of them were alumni of Camp

Where that first pivotal year was a story of unprecedented organizational, political and statutory advances by and for New Yorkers with disabilities, to me the crux of the next pivotal year, 1978, was a matter of generational succession. Within a few years after the high water mark of 1968, the tide began to turn. And the shift came at the hands

Jened, a summer camp for disabled children. They founded Disabled in Action and other new groups, and brought a much more confrontational, Sixties-style aggression to the cause.

Where the founders argued for legal rights and a representational foothold in government, the Boomers argued frankly for “CIVIL RIGHTS” in capital letters and openly expressed their anger at the traditional consignment to social limbo. They blocked traffic and seized offices and picketed telethons – actions that the founders, who’d lived through the McCarthy Era, never seriously considered.

Where the founders wore suits to their protests, the Boomers wore fatigues and ponchos. Where the founders had established lives and careers that they were trying to protect and advance, the Boomers had the nothing-to-lose flexibility of youth. So the Boomers didn’t petition for rights—they demanded them.

The founders looked at the Boomers and saw kids, recklessly courting backlash. The Boomers looked at the founders and saw conservative old men, treading too lightly.

To say the least, the Boomers’ entry into the City’s disability rights movement was divisive. The two groups had a tough time working together at first, and there wasn’t much cross-pollination. So World War II generation activists had relatively little buy-in to DIA or, for example, its big protests against Nixon’s veto of the 1972 Rehabilitation Act, and the young hippie-looking activists initially had little presence at the Mayor’s Office for the Handicapped (MOH, now MOPD), one of the founders’ most important institutional accomplishments.

Perhaps the lowest ebb came in 1974, with the protest against gas rationing during the OPEC oil embargo. The state failed to provide a gas-rationing exemption for disabled drivers, and it refused to listen to community input.

A public action became an obvious necessity. But where military veterans like Don Broderick of the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association (EPVA) had been an active and public part of the founders’ efforts, between the Generation Gap and young people’s antipathy for the Vietnam War, civilians and veteran activists had grown so far apart that there were actually two gas rationing protests, one by veterans and another by civilians, each separated by a week or so.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT MONTH

For more about Warren Shaw’s work in disability history visit www.DisabilityHistoryNYC.com.